



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ONE ASHBURTON PLACE, ROOM 1109
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02148
(617) 727-7600

MITT ROMNEY
GOVERNOR
KERRY HEALEY
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR
RONALD PRESTON
SECRETARY

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CONTACT:

Julie Teer
Felix Browne
(617) 725-4025

Romney Files Legislation To Lift Families From Poverty
Proposes to expand work requirements in line with federal standards

Governor Mitt Romney today filed legislation to help welfare recipients escape the poverty trap. His legislation mirrors a plan he filed as part of his budget submission in January to bring Massachusetts in line with stricter federal standards that are followed in 48 other states.

Romney said he is filing the bill as stand-alone legislation because of the Legislature's desire to deal with the issue apart from the annual budget, which was signed last week.

"Fundamentally, this is a debate about the best way to help someone lead a fulfilling life. We know that the best welfare system isn't a handout but a hand up," Romney said.

Massachusetts currently imposes a limited work requirement for its welfare system under a 1995 waiver from the federal government that expires at the end of September, 2005. When that happens, Massachusetts will be required to conform to stricter federal standards signed into law by President Clinton in 1996.

Following the introduction of work, welfare rolls in Massachusetts have plummeted from nearly 103,000 in 1995 to about 47,000 today. But with all the exemptions to the work requirement in this state, only 28 percent of today's welfare population has to work. Romney's plan would raise that to about 55 percent.

"It's our responsibility to not only provide the opportunity for people to get themselves out of poverty, but also to give them critical support services to help them make their dreams come true," said Lt. Governor Kerry Healey.

Investments related to this proposal include \$8 million for education and training and \$6 million for child care. Those funds, requested by Romney in his January budget submission, have already been approved by the Legislature. Romney will seek an additional \$600,000 for DTA caseworkers to assist families in their efforts to become self-sufficient.

To bring the state work requirement in line with federal standards, Romney's plan requires 20 hours of work by adult welfare recipients with children who are between the ages of one and five. Recipients who have children age six or older will be required to work at least 30 hours a week.

Currently, recipients with children between the ages of two and five are required to work 20 hours per week; those with children between the ages of six and eight are required to work 24 hours per week; and those with children nine or older must work 30 hours per week. Recipients with children under two are currently exempt from any work requirement.

To illustrate the positive effect that work can have on a person's life, Romney highlighted two former welfare recipients, Annette Jackson of Boston and Tasha Williams of Somerville. Jackson, the mother of a teenage daughter, is now employed at the Department of Transitional Assistance. Williams, who had not been employed for more than two years before enrolling in a supported work program, is now an administrative assistant at Shelter, Inc., a Boston group that works to fight homelessness.

"I am grateful to have had the support to be able to move on and move forward in my life," said Williams.

Said Jackson: *"After being laid off, I used the services of the Department of Transitional Assistance and ended up with a good job. I am glad to be back where I belong, and that's being employed."*

Adults with severe disabilities that meet federal standards would continue to be exempt from work under Romney's plan. However, for parents with less serious impairments there will be individualized employment plans developed based on an assessment of their capacity to work.

"Over the past decade there has been a growing recognition that persons with disabilities can and, in fact, are working in competitive jobs," said William E. Kiernan, Ph.D, Director of the Institute for Community Inclusion, a Boston organization that works to support the rights of children and adults with disabilities. *"With effective job matching, comprehensive support and a coordinated effort, employment in a competitive job can be a reality for many persons with disabilities"*

Massachusetts is one of only five states without a lifetime time limit for recipients to collect cash assistance. Romney's legislation calls for continuation of the current time limit of two years in a five-year period, but would also have Massachusetts adopt the federal government's five-year lifetime limit.

Romney's plan also rewards work by allowing welfare recipients to keep at least one half of their earned income before their monthly welfare benefits are reduced. Most welfare recipients can currently keep only one third of earned income.

"Relying solely on a welfare check traps people below the poverty line, but working even a minimum wage job for only 20 hours a week raises that same family well above the poverty level," said Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner John Wagner. *"We're grateful for the cooperative spirit demonstrated by the Administration and the Legislature in endorsing funding for these critical support services."*

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